

Family dodges tsunami destruction

KADENA AIR BASE, Japan — Lt. Col. **Eli Caison** and his family flew to the Thai resort town of Phuket on Christmas Eve for the vacation they had planned for months — lounging on idyllic, sun-smothered beaches and playing in the gentle surf — a welcome respite from the hectic flying schedule of the 353rd Special Operations Group.

Mother Nature, meanwhile, was busy adjusting the Caison's holiday plans in a way they'll never forget.

Colonel Caison, an MC-130P Combat Shadow pilot, awoke early December 26th for a 5-mile jog on the beach. His wife, **Nancy**, and two children, **Loren**, 16, and **Owen**, 13, exercised their holiday privilege to sleep in. Deep beneath the ocean surface 300 miles west, a planetary spasm sent one continental plate crashing into another. Colonel Caison felt nothing but warm sand under his bare feet and a balmy breeze.

The colonel went back to his hotel and gathered his tribe for breakfast in a restaurant near the beach. After breakfast they walked to the sand with towels, suntan lotion and one small backpack containing watches, wallets and a cell phone. Still before 10 a.m., beach stalls were busy hawking their wares to the 100 or so tourists.

"As the kids laid out their blankets and organized their stuff, a lady renting sun umbrellas and beach chairs turned to me and said, 'Look at the water, it's gone!'"

Boats, jet skis and buoys were all grounded and inclined to one side like a crooked picture. The water had retreated about a kilometer — and fast. Fish were flopping about on the sand where seconds earlier they were swimming contently.

"Suddenly I saw it pick up a medium-sized boat and fling it forward, into the air, like a toy," he said, and he began alerting his family to gather their items. "We started running through an alley between the restaurant and some shops. The wave followed us. The wall of water was still four feet high and catching us."

The Caisons sprinted in flip-flops

and swimsuits toward a stairwell leading to the hotel's second-floor sun deck. The water caught the colonel as he bounded up the stairs.

"It was up to my thighs as I hustled my family up the stairwell. Splintered restaurant furniture piled up and a table whacked me squarely in the back."

Twenty-five people on the sundeck watched as the waves consumed shops and bars and restaurants below. When the water showed no signs of slowing, they scaled a ledge and climbed over an air conditioning unit to the hotel roof. For three and a half hours they watched a horror show, listening to people scream and buildings crash. Colonel Caison pulled out his cell phone and relayed his predicament back to Kadena.

"Around two o'clock we felt it was safe enough to get off the roof," he said. "I wanted to retrieve our passports and credit cards so I found my way back into our rooms. Gone were cameras, a laptop computer, Owens' schoolbooks and recently finished homework, games, CDs, shoes and most of our clothes."

The colonel chucked a suitcase onto the sundeck to retrieve later

and took off with his family to higher ground. Walking up the hill, they passed a hospital frantically coming to grips with the disaster. More than 1,000 displaced people camped on the hilltop, and a generous Thai opened his three homes for showers, toilets, electricity and floor space.

"I was amazed at the kindness of these people," Colonel Caison said. "They took care of each other and never panicked. Nearly everyone had missing family members and very uncertain futures."

Before leaving to return home, the colonel went back to the hotel to retrieve what he could.

"There were dead bodies everywhere," he said. "Uprooted trees, overturned trucks and collapsed awnings lined the streets. It was complete devastation."

They flew to Bangkok wearing the clothes they had. After a few days of shopping for shoes and talking about their ordeal, they flew to Okinawa on New Year's Day.

"My kids always wanted an exciting vacation," Colonel Caison said. "They got one."

*Master Sgt. Michael Farris
353rd Special Operations Group*

courtesy photo



Nancy, Owen, Loren and Lt. Col. Eli Caison.